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Coffee Shop Theology: Translating Doctrinal Jargon into Everyday Life

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INTRODUCTION

COFFEE SHOP THEOLOGY

I'm excited about the subject matter of this book and of its sequel, *More Coffee Shop Theology*. Theology consumes me as the central interest of my life; I live, breathe, and talk it every day. I'm excited because it's a brand-new day for theology. More than ever before, we Christians must know what we believe and why. The reason is simple but serious:

If our anchor isn't set in a solid rock theology, we'll be washed out to sea on the riptide of bogus beliefs.

We are bombarded with an information revolution. We access more information in less time than any generation in human history. Thousands of pages of information come to us on one computer compact disk. A keystroke or two on our computers gets us into the Internet, which provides access to information from around the world. Fax machines, electronic mail, cellular telephones, television, radio, magazines, satellite, cable, and other technologies make our world smaller and bring us closer together. As one of my friends compared it, "We're trying to drink out of a fire hydrant."

The information in this book goes beyond facts and figures; it's ethics, philosophy, and theology all packaged in innocent bite-size (or byte-size) portions.

What is all this information doing to us? One serious consequence is *rapidly changing cultural standards that encourage us to bargain away our beliefs*. We now have a cafeteria line of beliefs. Modern society cherishes pluralism more each day. This approach welcomes all systems of thought as equally true, regardless of how unscriptural they may be or how strange they may sound. It says that none is better or worse. Absolute truth evaporates like the morning dew in this environment. Everyone's ideas claim validity as possible answers to our most pressing questions.

Such so-called tolerance and acceptance create theological uncertainty, in which all answers are tentative, in which people will clap for any idea on a television talk show. Everything, especially sound doctrine based on Holy Scripture, is up for grabs these days. If you don't believe me, read the articles in recent newspapers or newsmagazines about the unprecedented success of outlandish cults. *The stranger their beliefs, the quicker people line up and pay good money to join*. Hollywood stars trip over one another to be deceived. Where can we find truth these days?

One of the marks of Christianity, from the times of the Early Church until now, is its claim to God's truth. The Truth—not a truth. The Christian faith is not just a better idea equal to all other ideas. Christianity contends that God answers the most basic questions of human existence:

Who am I?

Where did I come from?

Why am I here?

What does my life mean?

Where am I going?

These questions finally relate to establishing an incredibly significant friendship with God. Christian believers through the ages have hungered to know Him better.

Never has this quest for God been as widespread as it is now. My grandparents lived a full life and died without ever having come in contact with individuals practicing another world religion. That is no longer true. We come in contact with followers of non-Christian religions every time we step outside, listen to the radio, watch a television program, or read the newspaper. Even if we stay home and never turn on the radio or television, faithful followers of these other religions will knock on our door, offering to instruct us in their ways. Their hospitality often rivals that of the welcome wagon.

Another reason Christians must more thoroughly understand their faith is because contemporary values do not hold the answers to our deepest questions. Science and technology have promised more than they have been able to deliver. We are giving up on those empty promises, because their answers don't work in life's trenches. Thus, as people continue their search for meaning and significance, they seem more willing to hear what the Christian faith offers.

So we have a two-part reason to understand our Christian faith more completely and accurately:

- (1) to satisfy our own hungry souls;
- (2) to be able to offer God's answers to friends whose questions about life and death push into their waking thoughts and sleepless nights.

C. S. Lewis made an insightful observation: "In the old days, where there was less education and discussion, perhaps it was possible to get on with a very few simple ideas about God. But it is not so now. Everyone reads, everyone hears things discussed. Consequently, if you do not listen to Theology, that will now mean that you have no ideas about God. It will mean that you have a lot of wrong ones—bad, muddled, out-of-date ideas."¹ Thus, we seek to understand our faith as completely and accurately as we can.

Concerning this journey of faith, I intend to present an easy-to-understand and true-to-life use of theology. Please don't get out the Pepto-Bismol or Tylenol if I sometimes end an explanation by calling it a mys-

tery. By “mystery” I simply mean that human minds cannot completely comprehend God’s ways. *Our inability to fully understand does not leave us completely in the dark nor make God unknowable or unreasonable.* Therefore, when I acknowledge a mystery, it’s not a cop-out, but a human limitation. Because God is infinite, our finite minds can never understand His wisdom. God is Creator; we are created. Big difference!

Knowing God better satisfies our hunger and creates more hunger. It satisfies us at a deep level because our hearts find rest in Him. At the same time, we hunger to know more. On the pages of this book I try to communicate Christianity’s central truths with simplicity, clarity, and brevity.

As I write these words, I picture us discussing these issues over a cup of coffee at the café on Main Street in my little hometown. The older men of the community gathered there during my childhood to discuss weather, politics, and religion. They sat for hours and thrashed out solutions. Most of the problems of the world could have been solved in short order if world leaders would have visited that café and heeded those men’s advice! *So read this work in the context of a friendly discussion at that little café.*

The topics, Bible references, quotes, and applications to life aim to inform and inspire your faith. The “Biblical Foundation” section of each chapter offers biblical references and includes basic truths that are all found in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. I worked hard to discuss the realities of faith in understandable language so anyone can apply them to life. I left all the big words in the fat books. This exercise of stating the miraculous work of God in plain speech has stimulated my own faith and excited me about its utter simplicity. We have an incredible message from God! I hope these discussions excite you as well.

Each of these short chapters presents a different aspect of our faith. However, the topics are interrelated like links of a chain, so I make connections between them from time to time. They all work together to form a whole picture. Note that the longest section of material, in *More Coffee Shop Theology*, discusses our salvation. That is because salvation is the main focus of Christianity and the chief message of Scripture. All doctrines feed into a better understanding of our salvation. Christlikeness, heaven, and fellowship with God are the ultimate goals.

I hope you enjoy reading through this journey as much as I did writing it. I don’t intend for you to make your way through it in one setting. A better plan is to read a chapter each day in your devotional time. Read a chapter, and then think about its application to your life throughout the day. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you new insights. I believe we will become more Christlike as we walk through our faith daily down Main Street. So let’s order a cup of coffee and a soft chocolate-chip cookie and get started.



God is basic Fact, the source of all other facts.

—C. S. Lewis

CHAPTER I

IN THE BEGINNING— GOD

THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

Biblical Foundation

“In the beginning God” (Gen. 1:1).

“And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Heb. 11:6).

Jesus never attempted to prove God’s existence. For our Lord, God’s existence was a self-evident fact as true as the air He breathed. He lived His life and conducted His ministry on the obvious cornerstone that God exists and that we must live accordingly.

The Truth Explained in Everyday Language

The Bible begins with “In the beginning God.” So let’s start our journey there. God is the starting point for Christian faith. He is Creator and Sustainer of everything. Everyone and everything start with Him. Of course, our understanding is somewhat limited about God for two reasons. First, we are limited in so many ways, while He has no limits and cannot be limited. It is humanly impossible for us ever to fully understand God, just as it is impossible for one juice glass to hold all the orange juice in the world. But we can rejoice and build our lives on what we know.

Another reason we don’t know everything about God is because He is our Source of information about himself. We cannot reach *up* to discover God the way we discover new information through scientific

experiments. Tabloid newspapers never leak information about the Almighty. Because He is God—the ultimate Source of everything—He must reach *down* and tell us everything we know about Him. God graciously and lovingly allows us to understand all we need to know to discover Him and sustain His friendship. He allows us to know Him enough to assure us a place in heaven for eternity. However, He does not tell us all we would like to know to satisfy all our curiosity or answer every question. That sometimes frustrates me. I want to know everything about God—right now!

**We can know as much as
we need to know for our
present point on the
journey of faith.**

Discount the frustration; rejoice in what you know. We *can* know a lot about God. My mother loves to say we know enough about God to keep us busy for a lifetime. God expects us to discover as much as we can and continually seek to know more about who He is and what He is like.

Spiritually inquiring minds will always want to know more—while, as stated above, we must admit that we will never know all there is to know about God. But that's all right. We can know as much as we need to know for our present point on the journey of faith. The Father introduced himself to Moses as “I AM THAT I AM” (Exod. 3:14, KJV), and that kept Moses developing spiritually for a lifetime.

Moses and Mom are right. When our search for knowledge about God seems to reach its limits, we simply accept the reality that He is bigger than our reasoning power. However, that does not stop us from enjoying the friendship He loves to have with us. I figure it's like marriage—a little mystery adds excitement to the journey. I like what Mark Twain said about understanding God: “We have infinite trouble in solving man-made mysteries; it is only when we set out to discover the secret of God that our difficulties disappear.”¹ When you hit a mental snag, do what I do: scratch your head, and go right on loving the Lord.

Our earliest information on God comes from Genesis, where we see Him creating all things. God always existed forever prior to the creation of the world, but we know almost nothing about that. No news reports filed. No video shot. No history books written. He gives us information about himself only as it relates to creation. Genesis shows that not only did God create all things, but also He did it for a significant purpose. He also preserves all that exists to this day and daily sustains it until it finally fulfills His intended purpose. His sus-

taining power keeps gravity holding our feet to the ground, the earth revolving around the sun, and Aunt Helen breathing.

“Sovereign” is a word used to describe God’s relationship to His world. When we say God is sovereign, we mean He has the absolute right to rule His creation as He sees fit. As some street kids put it, “Large and in charge!” Since He has this right of absolute rule, it absolutely amazes me that He limits His sovereignty by respecting the free will He gave human beings. Can you comprehend it? The Almighty Creator of the universe allows *us* the right to choose.

**“The best proof
of God’s existence is
what follows when
we deny it.”**

—William Sullivan

Let me explain with an illustration from my childhood. When we were small kids, my brothers and I loved to wrestle Dad to the floor. He could have easily thrown us off anytime he wanted to, but he let us pin him down and win the match. God does that too. He could override our free wills and make us serve Him if He chose to do so. But He wants us to *choose* to love and serve Him. He does not want a robotic relationship with us.

“Lordship” is another word we use to describe God in relationship to His world. In common language, He’s Boss. When we say God is Lord over all creation, we mean He sets the bounds within which everything operates. Though we may not fully realize it or always care to admit it, all matters on earth, including political boundaries, government forms, social systems, or weather patterns are always under God’s control. The Berlin Wall fell. The Soviet Union collapsed. Napoleon was defeated by a snowstorm. Though we sometimes worry that earthly situations will shatter into chaos, God quietly moves us and history toward His intended goal. Go to bed tonight and rest easy; God is in control! His porch light is always on. I know we don’t always see it now, but trust me on this one—He is Lord. Someday His Lordship will be acknowledged by everyone who has ever lived. As Paul reminded when he quoted Isa. 45:23, “‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God’” (Rom. 14:11). I like William Sullivan’s analysis: “The best proof of God’s existence is what follows when we deny it.”²

Using the Truth to Enrich Your Life

Sophisticated moderns want proof for everything. From children

on the playground to scientists in the laboratory, the demand says, "Prove it!" Even the existence of God comes into question. For thousands of years, God's thinking disciples have offered proofs like these for His existence:

1. Someone put everything into motion in our world. (cosmological argument)
2. Someone gave purpose, order, and intelligent direction to all things in our world. (teleological argument)
3. Someone gave us our built-in awareness that we ought to do the right thing. (anthropological argument)
4. Someone gave us our ability to think about the greatest and highest and best that we can conceive. (ontological argument)

Serious thinkers believed when they first explored these ideas, they had proved God's existence beyond reasonable doubt. But people doubt today just as they always have. Doubt is cheap and easy. But take another look at the list. Taken together, they have an amazing validity. Our world has high energy and is full of motion. Think of the Pacific Ocean's tide, Niagara Falls, and nuclear power. Our world has purpose, order, and intelligent direction. The sun rises and sets on schedule; seasons change. In our finest hour, we are aware that we ought to do the right thing. A voice within calls us to what's good and true, and our thoughts sometimes soar on eagle's wings to the greatest, highest, and best. So the reality of God's existence can be seen all around us. He is as real as the sun or the rain or the ground on which we walk.

Imagine all that points to the existence of God. Do we have absolute proof? No, but many threads make a very strong rope.

Fast Takes

1. God is the Source of everything.
2. He is in charge of our world and us.
3. He lets us know enough about himself so we can have satisfying, lifelong fellowship with Him.
4. Accumulative proofs of God's existence are everywhere.

Prayer

Eternal God, give me eyes to see evidence of Your existence in my world, and help me rest in the awareness that You are in charge.